UNITED
NATIONS

E

Economic and Social Council

Distr.
GENERAL

E/CN.17/IPF/1996/18
9 August 1996

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

COMMISSION ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
Ad Hoc Intergovernmental Panel on Forests
Third Session
8-20 September 1996

IMPLEMENTATION OF UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT DECISIONS RELATED TO FORESTS AT THE NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LEVEL, INCLUDING AN EXAMINATION OF SECTORAL AND CROSS-SECTORAL LINKAGES

Programme element I.5: Needs and requirements of countries with low forest cover

Report of the Secretary-General

SUMMARY

The present report describes progress made in implementing decisions of the Commission on Sustainable Development relating to programme element I.5, "Implementation of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development decisions related to forests at the national and international level, including an examination of sectoral and cross-sectoral linkages".

Countries with low forest cover can be found in countries of both the developed and the developing world. Given their social and economic differences, they face a variety of practical problems. In the developing countries, a strong dependence on forest goods and services for subsistence and a lack of viable alternatives place a heavy burden on rural communities and forest dwellers.

Some of the major problems in countries and areas with low forest cover are poorly protected watersheds, a decreasing number of endemic species, degradation of unique types of forests and scarcity of forest products, including timber, firewood and non-timber products. Development in those countries is often historically associated with periods of significant forest

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loss, having disturbing present-day consequences on economic systems in terms of land degradation and social, cultural and economic hardship.

Considering the present economic and financial situation at the global level, with decreasing levels of official development assistance and a concentration of private investment in countries with abundant forest resources, special attention must be given to the needs of developing countries with low forest cover.

The present report presents some proposals for the Panel's consideration, based on discussions held during the Panel's second session. The proposals are closely linked to those presented under other programme elements - in particular, I.1, I.2, I.3, I.4, II, III.1a and III.1b.

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INTRODUCTION

1. The present report describes progress made in implementing decisions of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development relating to programme element I.5, "Implementation of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development decisions related to forests at the national and international level, including an examination of sectoral and cross-sectoral linkages". At its third session, the Commission on Sustainable Development defined the programme element as the need to "propose measures to address the needs and requirements of countries with low forest cover in order to promote the activities aimed at conserving the existing coverage, with particular reference to the unique types of forests". 1/

2. At its first session, the Panel emphasized the need for preparation of "a report on the specific needs of countries with low forest cover, particularly developing countries, in order to promote activities aimed at conserving the existing coverage, with particular attention to unique types of forests. The report should consider particular situations where communities and forest dwellers depend on forests to meet their subsistence needs, such as fuel, food, forage, grazing provisions for livestock, shelter and medicinal plants. The preparation for this issue should also include an identification of areas of low forest cover, forests as protected areas, and dry wood lands". 2/

3. The outcome of the substantive discussion on programme element I.5 is contained in the report of the Panel at its second session (E/CN.17/IPF/1995/3). During their deliberations, delegates noted the high pressure placed upon forest ecosystems in countries with low forest cover, particularly in developing countries. They stressed the need for concerned countries and the international community to develop appropriate mechanisms to address the needs and requirements of those countries, and particularly of their forest dwellers and local communities. They also stressed the need to conserve biodiversity, particularly in areas with unique types of forests.

4. The present document takes into consideration paragraph 12 of the Statement on Biological Diversity and Forests from the Convention on Biological Diversity to the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests (UNEP/CBD/COP/2/19). It is closely linked with matters discussed in the Secretary-General's report on programme element I.2, Underlying causes of deforestation and forest degradation (E/CN.17/IPF/1996/15). The proposals for action suggested in both reports are highly complementary, particularly for countries with low forest cover.

5. This progress report was prepared by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), as lead agency for programme element I.5, in consultation with the secretariat of the Ad Hoc Intergovernmental Panel on Forests in the Division of Sustainable Development of the Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development of the United Nations Secretariat. It builds upon the report of the Secretary-General to the Panel at its second session (E/CN.17/IPF/1995/2) and is based on a document prepared with the assistance of the Overseas Development Administration. Proposals applicable to developed and developing countries are presented for the Panel's consideration.

I. OUTCOME OF THE DISCUSSIONS HELD BY THE PANEL AT ITS SECOND SESSION

6. During the substantive discussions on issues under programme element I.5 at its second session, the Panel noted that:

(a) Countries with low forest cover have a particular need to ensure security of goods and services through the sustainable management of forests. Appropriate policy options need to be defined, taking into account the Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Biological Diversity;

(b) The restricted area of forests in countries with low forest cover is of special importance for the production of timber and the provision of goods and services. Those services, including protecting water catchments, supplying energy, establishing protected areas and biological corridors, maintaining biodiversity and contributing to food security, recreation and health rehabilitation, need to be properly evaluated;

(c) The concept of national permanent forest estates needs to be further elaborated;

(d) The conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of its components, and the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising out of the utilization of genetic resources should be integrated into national forest programmes;

(e) Many of the forest types in countries with low forest cover are distinctive or even rare, while the proportion included in nationally designated protected areas is often below average;

(f) The environmental and socio-economic implications of importing forest goods or using substitutions should be carefully considered;

(g) Additional information may be required, and should be collected and disseminated, where doing so is cost-effective;

(h) Areas with low forest cover within forest-rich countries suffer from problems and pressures similar to those faced by countries with low forest cover and could in some cases benefit from similar solutions.

7. The Panel requested the secretariat to propose a working definition of low forest cover and consider ways of improving the productivity, conservation and enhancement of areas with low forest cover, taking into account the social and cultural dimensions.

II. CURRENT STATUS OF ISSUES RAISED BY THE PANEL AT ITS SECOND SESSION

A. Definitions

8. The following definitions are consistent with the terminology used in the Secretary-General's reports on programme elements I.1, National forests and land-use plans (E/CN.17/IPF/1996/14), and III.1 (a), Forest assessment (E/CN.17/IPF/1996/20).

1. Forests

9. Forests - whether natural, modified or planted - are biotic communities characterized by a predominance of woody vegetation. They are found in all climatic zones (boreal, temperate, tropical and mountainous) and may take the form of closed canopy forests or open canopy woodlands. They comprise all the components of forest ecosystems and their natural resources. Forest lands may be covered by forests or degraded - that is, currently devoid of trees or not maintained in a sustainable manner.

10. Forests and forest lands should be viewed as one part of a complex variety of land uses, together with their human and societal relationships, and not as an independent sector.

2. Low forest cover

11. According to the FAO Global Forest Resource Assessment, 3/ any area with 20 per cent minimum crown cover in developed countries or 10 per cent cover in developing countries is considered a forest. (Of the countries covered by the 1995 Assessment, 25 per cent had less than 7 per cent of their land under forest cover.) Forest cover may not adequately reflect the availability or accessibility of goods and services, since it fails to take into account geographical and climatic variations, the environmental, social and economic perspectives or issues of forest ownership or land tenure. Although the FAO data are not truly comparable across the globe, they are the only ones available for all forested countries.

12. Low forest cover is insufficient forest to ensure the sustainability of key components and processes essential for survival and development.

B. Countries with low forest cover

13. Countries with low forest cover are those in which the lack of forests is damaging to ecological processes. They may be either high- or low-income (see the table below). Given their social and economic differences, the four groups of countries shown face a variety of practical problems. In developing countries, strong dependence on forest goods and services for subsistence and a lack of foreseeable alternatives place a heavy burden on rural communities and forest dwellers.

Table. Income level and forest cover in selected countries

Income	Forest cover	
	Low	High
High	United Kingdom	Canada
	Denmark	United States
	Netherlands	Finland
	Singapore	Sweden
Low	China	Gabon
	Kenya	Indonesia
	Somalia	Malaysia
	Tonga	Papua New Guinea

14. Analyses such as the one in the table above are of particular importance when decisions have to be made on countries which require a substantial amount of development assistance.

15. A list of countries with low forest cover is given in the annex below. Of the 61 countries, islands, countries with critical watersheds, and arid and semi-arid countries make up a large proportion. This indicates the need for institutions involved in forest-related activities to work closely with those involved in the implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity, 4/ the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, particularly in Africa, 5/ the Barbados Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States, 6/ and other initiatives tackling hydrological issues (see particularly chapter 18 of Agenda 21, "Protection of the quality and supply of freshwater resources: application of integrated approaches to the development, management and use of water resources". 7/) Although the area of some island forests may be small, their value can be very high - for example, degradation of the watershed on the small Caribbean Island of Carriacou made it necessary to import fresh water. The application of the diagnostic framework proposed in IPF programme element I.2 has major relevance in this context.

16. The major problems faced in small island States and in semi-arid and arid countries with low forest cover are poorly protected watersheds, a decreasing number of endemic species, and scarcity of forest products, including timber, firewood and non-timber products used for medicine and food. Development in those countries, particularly in the Caribbean, is historically associated with tremendous forest loss, a loss that has come to have disturbing ramifications for their ecosystems, particularly land degradation, and their economies. Yet the value of the remaining forests for supporting other systems (e.g., water supply for agriculture, landscape for tourism) are neither well understood nor properly included in development planning.

17. Rural people in countries with low forest cover, especially those in semi-arid and arid environments, are either nomadic - grazing and browsing their

livestock in dry woodlands and shrub savannas - or settled - eking out a living from the land through a diversity of activities, including charcoal production, agriculture, gum collection and livestock production. In these areas, the benefits of land and resource utilization (i.e., woodland, crop and livestock management) are closely linked, reflecting the need for strong integrated and cross-sectoral approaches.

III. ASSESSMENT OF RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

18. A few national case-studies give cause for optimism. Some recent international initiatives of relevance to countries with low forest cover are outlined below.

A. National case-studies

19. In Guinea, recent studies have shown that, contrary to previously published reports on deforestation, forest cover is increasing. Many of the patches of forest are not remnants of a formerly widespread forest cover, cleared by farmers, as believed in the past, but are there only because local farmers have created them.

20. In Viet Nam the success of lowland paddy agriculture is entirely owing to the hydrological control provided by healthy upland watersheds. Viet Nam has become one of the major rice exporters of South-East Asia. The most recent forest inventory (1996) showed that deforestation had been almost entirely halted, that management of existing natural forests had improved, and that there had been a considerable increase in plantation area and in the numbers of trees in farmlands. Farmers who, under the new "Doi Moi" policy, have been allocated land report that they are diversifying production by growing trees, since they are now able to benefit from timber and wood sales.

21. Since the early 1970s St. Helena has developed a forestry programme with three elements: plantations of fast-growing pines; a small sawmill to meet local demand for timber; and a conservation programme to protect areas that contain rare and endangered endemic species, some of which are near extinction and require special propagation techniques. Plantations are of mostly Pinus pinaster (maritime pine). The sawmill is able to meet the demand for sawn timber and fence posts, although some high quality hardwood is still imported.

22. Many other countries, including India, Ireland, Finland and Kenya, are reporting increasing tree cover.

23. The common factor in these examples is the initiative that local people, notably women, have been able to take within a good planning and policy framework.

B. Forest-related studies and initiatives

24. Little forest-related research has been carried out in countries with low forest cover. Yet the future supply of and demand for forest products are particularly important in those countries, considering that most of them currently face difficulties in addressing forest-related subsistence needs.

25. Two recent global studies and initiatives are noteworthy:

(a) A Norwegian study on the long-term trends and prospects in the supply of and demand for wood products and their possible implications for sustainable forest management, conducted in support of IPF, concluded that the demand for forest goods and services will increase in the coming years;

(b) A study conducted by the World Business Council for Sustainable Development Study on the Paper Cycle concludes that over the next 50 years the consumption of pulpwood is expected to double. For the demand to be met, more forests are required. At least 15 million ha of new, fast-growing plantations worldwide are needed to meet the increasing forest demand.

26. The harshness of the climatic conditions in some of the countries with low forest cover, particularly developing countries in arid and semi-arid regions, combined with the long-term nature of most interventions in the forest sector, calls for more urgent and long-term commitments from Governments and donors.

27. One mechanism, developed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), to address the problem is the concept of forest partnership agreements. In such agreements, national commitments and donor support would be brought together in a legally binding form. The concept is based on the premise that the interests of donors and of recipient countries in preventing forest loss or increasing tree cover and in conserving biodiversity will coalesce. An agreement would have to be carefully negotiated so as to ensure that any resulting programme would be country-led, reflecting national needs and requirements, particularly those of local communities and forest dwellers, and not driven by the requirements of the donor. Long-term commitments would be required.

28. Since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), there has been increasing interest in incentives for sustainable forest management. Some are of a fiscal or financial nature. Others are part of the framework of policy, custom, tenure and legislation within which forests are managed. Such incentives should give positive signals to users that improved custody will bring benefits.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND PROPOSALS FOR ACTION

A. Conclusions

29. National forest cover can be measured in three ways: as a percentage of total land area, as forest area per capita or as a proportion of world forest resources contained within the country. Which assessment will prove most useful

will depend on the purpose of the assessment. Although all three are different, interestingly, when applied (with some exceptions), they identify many of the same countries (see the annex).

30. International, regional and national studies, based on situation analyses, future trends or alternatives, and tools for sustainable forest management, particularly in countries with low forest cover, are being developed and should be taken into account in national forest programmes. Mechanisms such as the UNDP forest partnership agreements should be capitalized on in order to reduce problems relating to securing long-term commitments and coordinating international assistance for the management, conservation and sustainable development of forests. Considering the current economic and financial situation worldwide, the decreasing levels of official development assistance and the concentration of private investment in countries with abundant forest resources, special attention will have to be given to the needs of the least developed countries with low forest cover.

B. Proposals for action

31. In addressing the needs and requirements of countries with areas of low forest cover or with low forest cover overall, particularly developing countries, the Panel may wish to consider the proposals outlined below.

1. National forest programmes

32. Countries are urged to develop a national forest programme to address production and conservation needs, using an integrated and participatory process involving all interested parties, particularly rural communities and forest dwellers.

33. Countries are urged to define a permanent forest estate around which all management and investment decisions would be made, based on the demand for forest goods and services currently and in the foreseeable future and on available forests and plantable land under all kinds of ownership.

34. Countries are urged to identify ways and means of addressing the problems of forest dwellers and local communities, making full use of existing local knowledge and taking into account the national conservation and development goals.

35. Countries are urged to incorporate into national forest programmes both qualitative and quantitative aspects of forest ecosystems and the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity.

2. Forest plantations

36. Countries are urged to heed the need for additional forest plantations which would address certain country needs, including those of a macroeconomic nature (i.e., earning foreign currency by supplying the international market with forest products). They should have minimal environmental impact and should not replace natural ecosystems of high ecological and/or cultural value.

3. Importation and substitution

37. Countries are urged to consider, whenever possible, the option of importing forest goods and services from forest-rich areas or substituting other products for specific forest goods and services, taking into account the related social, economic and environmental implications.

4. Participatory mechanisms

38. Countries are urged to develop appropriate policies and incentive packages to ensure the continuous participation of all interested parties, particularly women, rural communities, forest dwellers and private investors, in the implementation of the national programme.

5. Information collection and dissemination

39. Countries are urged to develop adequate information systems, based on reliable monitoring activities and sectoral and cross-sectoral exchange mechanisms, in order to allow for timely decisions relating to the national programme and/or policies. Tools such as forest resources accounting, being used in a few countries, could prove to be very useful for information-gathering.

6. Capacity-building

40. Countries are urged to embark on capacity-building programmes, based on an analysis of existing institutions at all levels, to ensure efficiency and effective participation in decision-making throughout the planning and implementation process, thus taking full advantage of the wealth of traditional knowledge available in the country.

7. Coordination mechanism

41. Countries are urged to establish good coordination mechanisms, involving relevant national and international institutions and organizations (governmental and non-governmental), including forest partnership agreements, in order to secure the long-term objectives of the national forest programme.

Notes

1/ Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1995, Supplement No. 12 (E/1995/32), chap. II, sect. D.5, annex I, sect. III (I), para. 5.

2/ E/CN.17/IPF/1995/3, para. 18 (I.5).

3/ FAO, Global Forest Resources Assessment: Global synthesis. FAO Forestry Paper No. 124 (Rome, 1995).

4/ United Nations Environment Programme, Convention on Biological Diversity (Environmental Law and Institutions Programme Activity Centre), June 1992.

Notes (continued)

5/ A/49/84/Add.2, annex, appendix II.

6/ Report of the Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States, Bridgetown, 25 April-6 May 1994 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.94.I.18 and corrigenda), chap. I, resolution 1, annex II.

7/ Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 3-14 June 1992 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.93.I.8 and corrigenda), vol. I: Resolutions adopted by the Conference, resolution 1, annex II.

Annex

LIST OF COUNTRIES WITH LOW FOREST COVER

Islands

American Samoa
Bahamas
Barbados
Bermuda
Cape Verde
Comoros
Cayman Islands
French Polynesia
Guam
Haiti
Kiribati
Mauritius
Netherlands Antilles
Niue
Pacific Islands
St. Pierre and Miquelon
St. Helena
Saint Lucia
Singapore
Seychelles
Tonga

Semi-arid/arid, with or next to deserts

Afghanistan
Algeria
Australia
Bahrain
Djibouti
Egypt
Iran, Islamic Republic of
Israel
Jordan
Kuwait
Kenya
Lebanon
Libyan Arab Jamahiriya
Mauritius
Mauritania
Morocco
Oman
Pakistan
Qatar
Saudi Arabia
Somalia

Syrian Arab Republic
Tunisia
Yemen

High elevation

Lesotho
Mongolia

High population density

Bangladesh
Burundi
El Salvador
Rwanda

Critical watersheds

China
Viet Nam
Thailand
Philippines

Temperate

Denmark
Iceland
Ireland
Netherlands
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
Uruguay